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BLACK CREATION

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BLACK ARTS AND LETTERS

One Dollar

RUNNING WITH SWEETBACK:
THE LIFE AND TRIALS OF MELVIN VAN PEEBLES
A CONVERSATION WITH "BLACK GIRL'S" J. E. FRANKLIN
THE BLACK ARTIST (A BRIEF PERSPECTIVE)



BLACK CREATION

VOLUME 3 NO. 1

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Norman Lewis, *The Yellow Hat*, Courtesy of the Newark Museum

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Film

By James P. Murray

Thirteen floors above 57th street in the offices of Cinemation, film maker Melvin Van Peebles sits behind a desk in a borrowed office, dressed in bright striped trousers, a black sweater, sport jacket and boots. He never wears ties.

He had just returned from Boston where he had won a lawsuit in Federal Court and had forced theater-owner Ben Sack to replace nine minutes that had been cut from his controversial film *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song*. With this victory and *Sweetback* being the year's top money making film, I asked him what he felt the impact of the film was. "I think it's decolonizing minds," he said. "It also shows, as a sideproduct that black cinema—because 95 percent of the people at this stage of the game that have been going are black—have made it number one which means we have a viable industry of our own."

Van Peebles' first real brush with success came in 1967 when the San Francisco Film Festival Award was presented to his film *The Story Of A Three Day Pass*.

Previous to that, Van Peebles had worked as a gripman on a San Francisco trolley after a tour as an air force navigator. With a photographer friend, Ruth Bernhard, he later wrote a book about the cable car run entitled "The Big Heart."

He also became interested in filmmaking at this point and sold his own car to finance three short films. He told me the story of sitting through a film in a San Francisco theater and seeing a black life depicted so poorly that he decided to make his own films.

He proceeded to do just that and later took his films to Hollywood in search of a beginner's job in the industry. When he arrived in the tinsel city, he was offered two positions—elevator operator and parking lot attendant. So he went to Europe where he made *Three Day Pass*.

In making the film, Van Peebles became the first black American director to work in France and *Three Day Pass* became a big hit there, enjoying a modest success in the

Running with Sweetback

states. Then, Hollywood offers came quickly. But he turned them all down flat. Two years later, after Gordon Parks and Ossie Davis had come on the scene, he accepted a Columbia Pictures offer to direct a satire on black-white relations. The final product was *Watermelon Man*, a comedy about an obnoxious white businessman who turns black overnight.

With the money he made from *Watermelon Man*, Van Peebles formed a one man production company, Yeah Inc., and wrote, produced, scored and starred in "Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song."

But making the picture and later, getting it to the public was no easy feat. Although Van Peebles had been offered a three picture contract at Columbia, most of the people in the industry could not bear to read the first full page of the *Sweetback* screenplay. In addition, low funds made it necessary to shoot the film in 20 days with a 19 man non-union crew. At one point when things got so bad

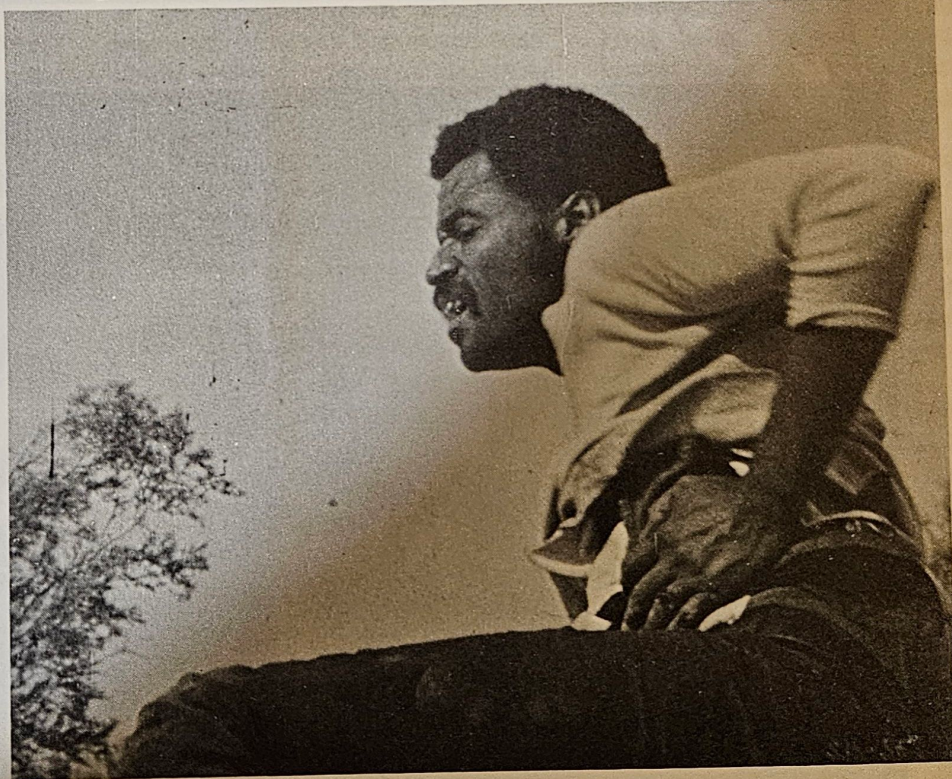
that he was down to his last \$13, Bill Cosby gave him a loan of \$50,000.

After the film was scored and edited, taking up another seven months, no distributor would touch it. Even with a distributor, only two theaters in the country would book it. One of them was the Detroit Grand Circus that had been averaging around \$4,000 a week playing third and fourth run products.

Sweetback opened March 30 at the Grand Circus and grossed over \$200,000 in its first four weeks. The Coronet Theater in Atlanta had also agreed to play the film and it also smashed all existing house records there as it had in Detroit.

Van Peebles owns distribution rights to the film but he worked out a seven-year lease with the New York based Cinemation Industries, previously known for marketing films on the sexploitation circuit.

Nine days before the first playdate via Cinemation, Van Peebles, flanked by two attorneys and an American



"I won't be blackmailed by my failures and I won't be blackmailed by my success. I'll do what I feel like doing when I feel like doing it."

Civil Liberties Union representative, held a Hollywood press conference and threatened a lawsuit against the Motion Picture Association of America if the film was not given a "non-rating" as far as black audiences were concerned.

He accused the MPAA of "cultural genocide" by imposing white judgments on black-oriented subject matter. Van Peebles had voluntarily submitted his film to the MPAA January 4 and paid the fee to have it screened. When "Sweetback" was given an X-rating, barring youths under 18, he protested. When the film opened in New York, a sign on the marquee read: "Rated X by an all-white jury." At the press conference, Van Peebles gave the MPAA ten days to reply to his ultimatum.

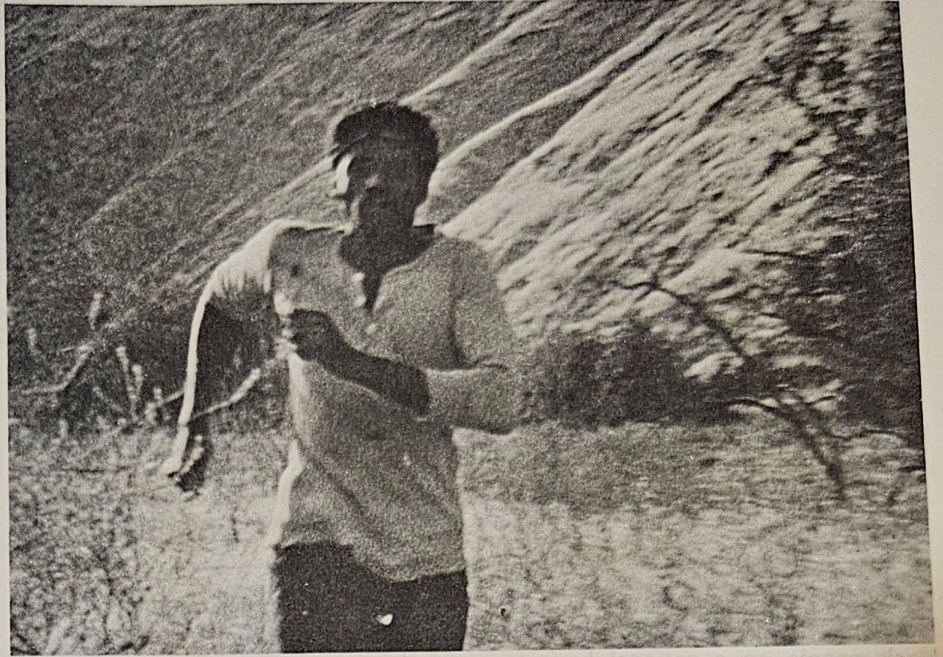
MPAA president Jack Valenti responded by stating that films "are not rated on the basis of race. They are rated solely on the basis of informing parents about the content of the film—all parents, black and white."

Asked what the status of his threatened action was, he replied, "I'm suing them. I'm fighting them. That's all I can do. It's a long drawn out process, it's a lot of bread. Everybody's mumbling, talking about this isn't revolutionary, brother, that isn't revolutionary—but nobody has come forward to help me pay the bread, pay the lawyers."

Before *Sweetback* was released, Van Peebles had described the film as "relevant." He doubts that it could have ever been made in the Hollywood system even if a studio had offered to back the project.

"To make a relevant film in Hollywood," he said, "is not the easiest of tasks. The battle for the minds of black people is a very important battle. If you are going to make a relevant thing, you need your own communications system. It was impossible to get financing and make the movie the way I wanted. What they considered a little control, I considered extreme control. They wanted a very strong say including the last say, the final cut. But that is a right they assure you they'll never exercise. It's like a sword hanging over your head."

So, as an independent, he completed his film and it has grossed



"On many levels Van Peebles is attempting to communicate some crucial ideas . . . and he is dealing in revolutionary terms."

almost \$10 million. Many in the industry are now predicting that it will become the most lucrative independently produced movie in the history of the American movie industry. A paperback book and Stax sound track album of the same name are also doing well.

But the establishment still ignored him. His movie was reviewed by Newsweek, Cue, Variety and New York but it was ignored by Time, Life, Look and the New York Daily News. Because it was a major movie, definitely making major money, Van Peebles was not happy at being snubbed and he indicated his dissatisfaction in a Variety interview.

The New York Times did review the film in a grand way. Vincent Canby wrote a front page review in the Sunday arts section which was largely negative. Equal time, however, was given to soul brother Clayton Riley on the inside that same day and he was as enthusiastic as Canby was negative. Riley, whose enthusiasm for the film was later challenged in Harlem at a Sunday panel discussion, also wrote another column interpreting the film in the Amsterdam News. Weeks later, when he wrote a review of Gordon Park's black supercop adventure

Shaft he again said in comparison that "Sweetback" was far more significant as a black man's movie.

Van Peebles considered his movie revolutionary. One of the most gratifying affirmations of "Sweetback's" success in communicating that ideal must have come when the Black Panther newspaper devoted virtually its entire twelve pages to a sweeping, detailed analysis of the film. Defense Minister Huey Newton's scene by scene review in the newspaper, an effort that included no less than four Biblical quotes, was a fascinating call for black community support of the film.

"On many levels," Newton wrote, "Van Peebles is attempting to communicate some crucial ideas and motivate us to a deeper understanding and the action based on that understanding. He has certainly made effective use of one of the most popular forms of communication—the movie—and he is dealing in revolutionary terms."

Some people in Van Peebles hometown of Chicago did not agree. The Kuumba Workshop of Chicago, a group of some 70 actors, writers, painters, singers, dancers and others of creative interest aged 6 to 60 em-



"... nothing more than a hustle of black people's money, their fears, their weaknesses, desire to see themselves in movies and the sexual hangups of a relatively few blacks."

barked on a campaign of "black awakening and assertion" to alert black people on a national basis to what they believed to be dangers and distortions in the film.

Kuumba director, Mrs. Val Gray Ward called *Sweetback* "nothing more than a hustle of black people's money, their fears, their weaknesses, desires to see themselves in movies and the sexual hangups of a relatively few blacks. That's why we're appalled at the filth degradation, distortion and almost total negativism of *Sweetback*—both as a movie and social statement to black people."

On the surface, *Sweetback* is the story of a black pimp, raised in a whorehouse, who comes to the defense of a young militant by beating two white cops, then kills two others while on the run, finally escaping across the Mexican border. It ends with a warning: "Watch out. A badasssss nigger is coming back to collect some dues."

Van Peebles was contemptuous of those blacks who didn't accept his film. I asked him if there was a problem with black people being able to absorb messages in films.

"I think that any American's mind has a degree of colonization," he said. "I don't know about others but this particular film is a complete break-away from a certain way of thinking which of course leads intellectually into more difficulty for understanding. The intellectual has been trained to lean against something or into something. He has no material in his

computer for understanding what he sees (in *Sweetback*). He needs a whole new program. This can be very confusing and it leads to a great deal of misunderstanding."

As to the future, Van Peebles commented: "I'll do whatever comes to me naturally. I got a play on Broadway next season. I got an album I'm working on. I'll make another film. I won't be blackmailed by my failures and I won't be blackmailed by my success. I'll do what I feel like doing when I feel like doing it."

This fall, the play he referred to, "Ain't Supposed to Die A Natural Death" will open. Then he'll start on his next feature film, "Don't Play Me Cheap," a musical comedy based on "Harlem Party," a play he wrote during his stay in Europe.

Now, an established leader in black filmmaking, I asked Van Peebles what he felt the role of the black movie-maker should be in context of the black community. He indicated that he felt this to be an individual endeavor. "The guy has to look into his own heart and see where his head is at," he said.

When I asked him for personal background information, he said, "I'm black and that's all that counts."

Not once during our conversation of 35 minutes did he smile. His answers were curt and often as probing as the questions. He was defensive yet self assured. Of all that can be said of Melvin Van Peebles, one fact stands out: he is a man that takes his filmmaking seriously. ■